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ABSTRACT

Perceived control is becoming an increasingly popular topic in the literature of communication. Intriguing evidence exists to suggest that the key to understanding the role of locus of control in the interpersonal encounter lies in appreciating the enthymematic nature of human interaction and the role of perceived control in this enthymematic process. A literature review examines evidence for the enthymematic hypothesis in studies in the areas of classroom power, social influence, interpersonal conflict, interaction style, and the doctor-patient encounter, as well as in research from the perspective of learned helplessness concerning explanatory style. The enthymematic perspective of control beliefs both links control beliefs with communicative decision making and ties therapeutic or strategic change to the long tradition of rhetoric or persuasion. Taken together, the studies reviewed offer intriguing evidence of the essentially rhetorical nature of strategic or therapeutic communication, and provide a basis for a "meaning-centered" integration between psychology and communication study. (Contains 66 references.) (Author/SG)

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Perceived Control as Enthymeme: Implications for Strategic Communication

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Perceived Control as Enthymeme: Implications for Strategic Communication

David A. Brenders

Abstract

Perceived control is becoming an increasingly popular topic in the literature of communication. It is the thesis of this paper that intriguing evidence exists to suggest the key to understanding the role of locus of control in the interpersonal encounter lies in appreciating the enthymematic nature of human interaction and the role of perceived control it this enthymematic process. Evidence for the enthymematic hypothesis can be found in studies in the areas of classroom power, social influence, interpersonal conflict, interaction style, and the doctor-patient encounter. Research from the perspective on learned helplessness concerning explanatory style is also reviewed. The enthymematic perspective of control beliefs both links control beliefs with communicative decision-making and ties therapeutic or strategic change to the long tradition of rhetoric or persuasion. Taken together, the studies reviewed in this paper offer intriguing evidence of the essentially rhetorical nature of strategic or therapeutic communication, and provide the basis for a "meaning-centered" integration between psychology and communication study.

Perceived Control as Enthymeme: Implications for Strategic Communication

The concept of perceived control or locus of control has made a major contribution to the literatures of psychology, counseling, health care, and teaching (Brenders, 1987, 1989; Lefcourt, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984). Studies numbering well into the thousands attest to the proposition that expectations for internal control, e.g., expectations that important life outcomes are attainable through personal effort, yield perceptions and behaviors that are fundamentally different from those arising from an external, fatalistic orientation. That is, those who believe in the primacy of fate, powerful others, or "the system" inhabit a different psychological world from those who expect outcomes to be the result of their own efforts, whether for good or ill (see Brenders, 1987).

A review of recent articles reveals that the concept of perceived control or locus of control is finding its way into the communication literature. Studies in various communicative contexts such as the use of classroom power (Plax, Kearney, McCrosky, & Richmond, 1986; Stewart, Kearney, & Plax, 1986; Wheeless, Stewart, Kearney, & Plax, 1987), social influence (Canary, Cody, & Marston, 1986; Marston, Baaske, & Cody, 1985), interpersonal conflict (Canary, Cunningham, & Cody, 1988), interaction style (Hamid, 1989), and the doctor-patient encounter (Arntson, Makoul, Pendleton, & Schofield, 1989; Howell-Koren & Tinsley, 1990) have included this construct within their explanatory framework. Replicating the earlier work of psychologists such as Dudley (1977), Lefcourt, Von Baeyer, Ware, & Cox (1979), and Paulhus (1983), Hamilton (1991) has also revived the interest in communication-specific locus of control scales.

Although research on the relationship between locus of control and

the interpersonal encounter is relatively new, it is the thesis of this paper that intriguing evidence already exists to suggest that the key to understanding the role of locus of control on the interpersonal encounter lies in appreciating the enthymematic nature of human interaction and the role of perceived control in this enthymematic process (see also Brenders, 1989).

The Enthymeme

That the enthymeme should play a role in explaining the correspondence between personality and communication behavior should not be too surprising, since this concept has been fundamental to our understanding of communication and persuasion from at least the time of Aristotle. Although scholars have argued as to the precise nature of the enthymeme (see Conley, 1984), a widely accepted interpretation suggests that the enthymeme serves as a "rhetorical" syllogism. That is, unlike the syllogisms of demonstrative logic that "lay down" or reveal precisely the premises used in support of their conclusion, the enthymeme is an incomplete syllogism. This incompleteness invites the other to supply missing premises to make the argument intelligible. Since these missing premises must come from the belief system of the other, what is a sensible proposition to one auditor may be unconvincing to another. Bitzer (1959) has argued that, although enthymemes are deficient proofs in the formal sense, they are the "strongest possible" rhetorical proofs, since, by being "jointly produced" by speaker and hearer, "they have the value of being self persuasive" (p. 408).

By 1970 Delia had already suggested a connection between the enthymeme and cognitive psychology. His interpretation stressed the commonality between the rhetorical perspective of Aristotle and the psychological perspective of authors such as Krech and Crutchfield (1948),

who in turn suggest that, "If we wish to control or influence the thinking process of people, we must 'start where they are' and attempt to direct their thinking from that point" (p. 145). For Delia, the enthymeme, interpreted through the perspective of the consistency theories of cognitive psychology, suggested the basic principle that, "If a desired opinion or action can be demonstrated to be consistent with fundamental beliefs and values, it tends to be assimilated; if an idea or behavior opposed can be shown to be inconsistent, it tends to be rejected" (p. 146).

Norton (1982) more fully realized the enthymematic nature of discourse and used this insight to explicate the principles of therapeutic discourse. As Norton (1982) suggests:

> The good therapist or good rhetor controls the enthymematic process by first shaping the structure of the enthymeme. . . The enthymematic process works because the receiver brings something to the process; the receiver supplies critical premises. The enthymematic process works because the sender and receiver interact (p. 306).

Although most discussions of the enthymeme concern the intentional creation persuasive messages, the above authors allude to the enthymematic nature of all discourse (see also Norton, 1983, pp. 30-31). "Messages serve an enthymematic function when they invite or accommodate certain premises or world views and, by implication, discount or discourage competing perspectives"(Brenders,1989, p. 118). Therefore, "whenever a person fills in premises to make sense of a message, the enthymematic process is occuring"(Norton & Brenders, in development).

The Enthymeme and Personality

As Delia had suggested early on, this definition of the enthymeme is very congenial with recent trends in cognitive psychology. As this paper will demonstrate, the enthymeme also serves as a heuristic link between cognitive processes and communicative decision-making.

There is ample evidence to suggest that persons adopt premises about the self that "fit," or confirm their overall self view. The work of Leary (1957) suggests that, "everyone tends to make his own interpersonal world"(p. v). In other words, Leary suggests that persons behave in such a way as to derive predictable reactions from others. Theses predictable interpersonal patterns confirmed the stability of the self's world and minimize anxiety.

Swann (1983, 1985) has suggested that persons engage in an active and pervasive process of *self verification:*

> I contend that once people form self-concepts, they engage in a variety of behavioral and cognitive activities that tend to verify and confirm these conceptions. . . these self-verification processes enable people to create - both in their social environments and their own minds - a social reality that verifies, validates, and sustains their self-concepts (Swann, 1985, p. 100-101).

To Swann (1985), the self-verification process suggests that, "People not only prefer information that confirms their self-conceptions, they translate this preference into active efforts to acquire such information"(p. 103). This means that persons not only "see more self-confirmatory evidence than is actually there," but actively cultivating self -confirming "opportunity structures"(Swann, 1983, 1985). As Cody and McLaughlin (1985) have

suggested, "Individuals actively seek situations that foster and encourage the behavioral expression of their own characteristic dispositions"(p. 268). For Swann (1985), one's opportunity structure involves such things as invoking certain self-definitions through the use of symbols such as clothing and titles, selective affiliation, and interpersonal prompts (Swann, 1983, p. 36-41).

Consistent with the enthymematic process, Swann contends that self-verification is not commensurate with an urge for self-promotion or self enhancement. Swann's analysis suggests that the person's efforts are not directed towards self-enhancement unless the person has a positive self view. Information will be assimilated and behavior invoked consistent with the self concept, whether positive or negative (see Swan, 1985, pp.106-110). Echoing our discussion of the enthymeme above, Swann quotes Prescott Lecky's suggestion that, "Any value entering the system which is inconsistent with the individual's valuation of himself cannot be assimilated; it meets resistance and is likely, unless a general reorganization occurs, to be rejected" (Lecky 1945, in Swann, 1985, p. 105-106).

The Enthymematic Function of Perceived Control

The motive for self-enhancement is also evident in the person's outlook concerning personal control. That is, persons seek information and cultivate situations that correspond to their control beliefs, and thereby tacitly validate these beliefs.

The "congruence hypothesis" developed by Strickland (1978) and Sandler, Reese, Spencer, and Harpin (1983) posits that "persons seek out, and show greater motivation and satisfaction in, situations that correspond to their beliefs about personal control" (see Brenders, 1989, p. 118). The two-process model of perceived control developed by Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder (1982) also suggests that beliefs in both internal and external control

generate active processes of assimilation. Those who believe strongly in their own abilities act on their control beliefs by developing proactive agendas for "changing the world." Those who doubt their ability to exert such "primary control," actively seek to change the self through "secondary control" strategies, such as predicting and accommodating otherwise unchangeable events, cultivating associations with those with greater power, aligning the self with the forces of luck or fate, or reinterpreting the meaning of otherwise unchangeable events.

The situational congruence hypothesis of Sandler, et al. (1983) and the two-process model of perceived control suggested by Rothbaum, et al. (1982) can be summarized as the control-relevant facets of the person's opportunity structure. As control perceptions are a fundamental part of the personality (Lefcourt, 1983), control perceptions will play an important role in organizing the person's thinking and behavior.

The above discussion of the enthymematic function of control beliefs suggests the following principles:

Principle 1: Persons will make interpretations enthymematically congruent with their prevailing beliefs about personal control.

This principle suggests that: a.)Information will be evaluated according to its relevance with the person's control orientation, b.) Persons will selectively attend to information congruent with their control orientation, & c.) Persons will discount information incongruent with their control orientation.

Principle 2: Persons will pursue communicative strategies and behavioral plans consistent with their control orientation.

Principle 3: Communications and behavior inconsistent with the person's control orientation will engender resistance.

Included in these principles is communication and behavior designed to

directly challenge the person to revise his or her control outlook.

Evidence already exists in the communication literature in support of each of the above principles. The extensive psychological literature on locus of control provides further substantiation.

Perceived Control and Information Congruence

Ample evidence exists to suggest that those with an internal control orientation process information differently from those with an external orientation (see Brenders, 1987, 1989). From the early investigations of Seeman and Evans (1962) and Seeman (1963), researchers have discovered that internals are more receptive to information relevant to their situation, especially when such information would give them the "edge" in exerting control over the situation (see Lefcourt, 1982). Consistent with the enthymematic process, externals may actually resist relevant information (see DeVito, Bogdonanowicz, and Resnikoff, 1982).

Burger (1989) has posited a self-presentation model to explain such selective resistance. He suggests that:

> when situational or personality variables cause an increase in perceived control to increase concern for self-presentation, decrease the perceived probability of obtaining desired outcomes, or focus attention on predictable aversive stimuli, then the likelihood of negative reactions to personal control also increase (Burger, 1989, p. 247).

That is, to seek information relevant to a task or to have such information available, is in a sense to go on record as having no reasonable excuse for not doing something about the situation. One way to salvage one's self presentation when one believes that one cannot control some outcome is to be in the dark about the situation or lacking in information on how to deal

with it. Such ignorance also reduces the anxiety that results from the awareness of a predictable aversive event over which one has no control (see Burger, 1989).

The connections between control orientation and what is noticed can impact on the consequences of compliance or the self-presentational consequences of being influenced. Researchers interesting in the use of power in the classroom (Plax, Kearney, McCrosky, and Richmond, 1986; Stewart, Kearney, & Plax, 1985) have discovered that students with an external locus of control orientation perceive teachers as using more frequent "behavioral alteration techniques" than are reported by internal students of the same teacher. Wheeless, Stewart, Kearney, & Plax (1987) give an explanation for this finding that is congenial with the enthymematic nature of control beliefs. As these authors suggest:

> Besides being a powerful expectancy, locus of control may be related to differential implicit theories that persons hold about the way people are. Externals tend to view others as governing, while internals tend to view the self as governing. Thus, personal constructs of the external and the internal are different (Wheeless, et al., 1987, p. 252).

Whether or not one agrees with the "governing-not governing" dichotomy, these researchers' data suggests that persons selectively view situations to preserve its congruence with their control orientation. The classroom opportunity structure of the external requires a teacher who takes charge, and therfore looks for controlling messages. The internal may be more motivated to deny teacher influence, but this relationship possesses more subtlty and sophistication than can be captured in the conditions of the above study (see Lefcourt, 1982, pp. 47-55).

Psychologically "hardy" individuals (see Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982) may also maintain their outlook of commitment and control through the way they attribute causes for events. Hull, Van Treuren, & Propsom (1988) have demonstrated that psychologically hardy individuals differ in their "attribution style." Specifically, those scoring high on commitment and control:

> . . .were more likely to perceive positive events as important, as due to internal, stable, global causes, and themselves as personally responsible. High-commitment individuals were more likely than low commitment individuals to perceive negative events as unimportant, as due to external, unstable, specific causes, and themselves as not personally responsible (p. 511).

Therefore, the hardy individual assimilates information and interprets events differently than the non-hardy individual. Furthermore, these differences in attribution style result in confirming and maintaining either a hardy or non-hardy outlook.

The work of Foon (1989) provides more direct evidence in support of the enthymematic function of perceived control. She found that the therapist's locus of control orientation interacted significantly with the control orientation of the client in predicting success in therapy. That is, "Internal LOC therapists expected to be more effective with internal clients while external therapists anticipated greater success with external clients" (Foon, 1989, p. 259). Foon (1985) also found that a congruence between therapist-client locus of control expectations significantly improved expectations of success for both therapist and client. These studies are important since these effects were achieved solely through communication.

That is, they suggest that control-relevant premises are embedded in the talk of therapist and client, and potentially available for evaluation by the other. Foon's (1985, 1989) work suggests that a person's control ideology is revealed in the observations, insights, narratives, and explanations they give, and are evaluated by the other in terms of their correspondence with the other's own control ideology.

Perceived Control, Communicative Strategies, and Behavioral Plans

Intriguing evidence exists to support the second proposition that locus of control will influence a person's communicative and behavioral strategies. In the area of social influence, Marston, Baaske & Cody (1985) have speculated that internals and externals "employ different rules in selecting influence tactics"(p. 4). Their work also suggests that situational parameters influence the relationship between locus of control and tactic selection. Canary, Cody, & Marston (1986) found that persons with an internal locus of control had more optimistic expectations for a compliance gaining situation and used more positive and less coercive strategies. Externals tended to "prefer a compliance-gaining context where they are dependent on the target and then exploit that dependence by manipulation of feelings". . .(p. 18). Canary, Cunningham, & Cody (1988) report that locus of control interacted significantly with the choice of proactive (integrative) versus reactive (sarcasm, avoidance, denial) conflict resolution tactics.

Arntson, Makoul, Pendleton, & Schofield (1989) provide evidence for the external's preference for dependence in the health care encounter. These authors noted that externality was associate with increased concern over the responsibility the doctor gave them in the medical encounter. As they suggest, "although patients appear to benefit from enhanced communication

(exchange of information) with their doctor, inviting them to take more responsibility may be dysfunctional"(p. 90). These authors echo the concerns of Folkman (1984) who speculated that greater patient control may actually result in greater patient anxiety (see Burger, 1989, p. 251).

This work suggests that the communicative paths people choose tend to be influenced by the person's perceptions of control (see also Brenders, 1987). The available evidence also suggests that persons are motivated to resist information designed to change their control orientation.

Explanatory Style

Intriguing links between the enthymeme and control perceptions have also emerged from recent research on learned helplessness (Seligman, 1990; Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Seligman and his associates have discovered that a person's optimistic-pessimistic "explanatory style" regarding the causes of good and bad events influences the person's reactions to life events and resistance to depression. Given the importance of explanatory style to the discussion of the enthymematic nature of perceived control, the "learned helplessness hypothesis" will be reviewed in some detail.

Early work on helplessness stressed the relationship between the experience of uncontrollable (and usually aversive) outcomes and later performance. According to Seligman (1975):

> Laboratory evidence suggests that when an organism has experienced trauma it cannot control, its motivation to respond in the face of later trauma wanes. Moreover, even if it does respond, and the response succeeds in producing relief, it has trouble learning, perceiving, and believing that the response worked. Finally, its emotional balance is disturbed: depression and anxiety, measured in various ways, predominate (p. 22-23).[1]

In other word, exposure to uncontrollable aversive outcomes can produce a state of *learned* helplessness, and helplessness, once learned, can produce self-reinforcing cognitive, motivational, and behavioral deficits (see also Abramson, Garber, & Seligman, 1980).

The revised helplessness hypothesis (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) added the notion that the effects of helplessness were moderated by the person's explanation for helplessness. Explanations that stressed internal (vs. external), stable (vs. unstable), and global (vs. specific) causes of the experienced uncontrollability rendered the individual more susceptible to lowered self esteem, depression, and impaired performance. That is, negative events attributed to internal causes are a greater threat to self esteem than such events attributed to external causes. Attributions to transient causes produce less chronic states of helplessness than do negative events attributed to stable causes. Finally, global causal attributions of failure generalize more readily to other aspects of the person's life than do specific attributions. Global attributions, therefore, threaten to make the helplessness deficits more pervasive (see Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Persons who make depression prone attributions (internal, stable, global) for negative events are saying to themselves, "it's me; it's going to last forever; and it's going to affect everything I do" (Peterson & Seligman, 1984, p. 350). Such evaluations blacken the person's mood and erode motivation.

Of greater interest to our present discussion, Peterson & Seligman (1984) present compelling evidence for the proposition that persons adopt relatively consistent "explanatory styles" for success and failure experiences, or, "the habitual tendency to choose certain kinds of explanations for bad versus good events" (p. 350). Such a style is not linked to specific circumstances, but involves, "individual patterns in the selection of causes

over a variety of events"(p. 350). Such a style provides a stable enthymematic base for explaining why good and bad events befall the person, and therefore how helpless or masterful they are to be in facing life challenges.

These authors are quick to note that explanatory style itself is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause of depression, even though their research shows that certain styles put persons at risk for depression. There are at least three compelling reasons for this.

Peterson & Seligman (1984) note that one's causal explanation for some event and one's expectations of what such an event means for the future do not always coincide. For example, unstable events (accidents, sudden illness, winning the lottery) can have stable repercussions for the future (permanent disability, diminished health, a life of luxury) and vice versa. They therefore conclude that:

> Because there is usually similarity between causal explanation and expectation of consequences, knowing an individual's explanation and explanatory style will usually predict helplessness deficits. Because there can sometimes be dissimilarity, an individual's causal explanation and explanatory style will not cause the deficits. And so we speak of these variables as risk factors (just as smoking is a risk factor for lung cancer), rather than sufficient conditions for helplessness and depression (p. 350).

These researchers also stress the notion that it is the occurrence of negative events in concert with a defeatist explanatory style that predicts helplessness and depression. As Seligman & Schulman (1986) explain:

> The interaction of the pessimistic explanatory style and [the failure], though neither necessary nor sufficient conditions,

> increases the likelihood of helplessness deficits. This is a species of *diathesis-stress* model, in which the *diathesis*, though probably not constitutional, is a pessimistic explanatory style, and the *stress* is repeated failures (p. 832).

Although pessimistic explanatory styles may beget failures which may then encourage more pessimism (see Peterson & Seligman, 1984, 370-371), both components appear to be important contributors.

A third argument distinguishes between the potential weight of the most likely situational explanation for the event in question as compared to one's habitual tendency to explain events in a certain way. That is, when circumstances favor certain explanations, the contribution of explanatory style is diminished. Conversely, when the causes of events are unclear or ambiguous, the contribution of one's explanatory style to the explanation of events is relatively greater.

For example, Peterson & Conn (1982, reviewed in Peterson & Seligman, 1984) noted that although most persons experience sadness and depression after ending a romance, persons suffered more severely if their partner left them for someone else rather than for some less personal reason (e.g., attending a different college). The greater suffering experienced by such persons may be in part due to the relative implausibility of external, unstable, and specific reasons for abandonment. The situation itself is more congenial to personal (internal) and non-transient aspects of the gilted party, e.g., "there is something consistently unattractive about me."

The work on explanatory style adds another facet to our understanding of the enthymematic nature of perceived control. Like locus of control, one's style of explantion meaningfully frames the events that befall the person and provides a rationale for expectations and future plans. Explanatory style, like

locus of control, is a trait-like disposition assessable through self-report measures. Peterson & Seligman (1984) describe its cross situational properties as being, "analogous to liberalism in politics or vanity in interpersonal relations," further emphasizing its enthymematic nature (p. 370).

The work of Seligman and his associates has also shown that explanatory style is a normal part of spontaneous communication, and thus retrievable through content analysis (Peterson & Seligman, 1984; Schulman, Castellon, & Seligman, 1989; Zullow, Oettingen, Peterson, & Seligman, 1988; Zullow & Seligman, 1990). Peterson, Bettes, & Seligman (1982; reviewed in Peterson & Seligman, 1984) have shown that such spontaneous communications are reliable expressions of the person's underlying explanatory style as measured psychometrically (see also Schulman, Castellon & Seligman, 1989). Like locus of control, one's underlying premises about optimism or pessimism are therefore detectable in talk without being the subject of talk (cf. Foon, 1989).

Paralleling Foon's (1989) work with locus of control, explanatory style as expressed in spontaneous communications seems to influence the opinions and behaviors of others. For example, Zullow Oettingen, Peterson & Seligman (1988) and Zullow & Seligman (1989) have shown that presidential candidates from 1948 through 1984 whose nomination speeches projected an abundance of pessimism as an explanatory style have gone on to lost nine out of ten elections.

In addition, Peterson & Seligman (1984) speculate about the potential origins of explanatory style in mostly communicative terms. That is, although one explanation for the genesis of pessimism is a fateful negative event such as the early loss of a parent (see Brown & Harris,1978), or the hopeless poverty endured by the lower classes during the Great Depression

(Elder, Bettes, & Seligman, 1982; cited in Peterson & Seligman, 1984), Peterson & Seligman (1984) stress communicative learning from parents and teachers in the formation of the child's explanatory style (see also Dweck & Licht, 1980).

Control Orientations are Self Sustaining.

The concept of resistance has has a long tradition in psychology (see Anderson & Stewart, 1983). Swann (1985) suggests that persons actively behave in such a way that their self concepts are confirmed or verified, even if the self concept is painfully negative. Therefore, internals and externals should behave in such ways that their existing control orientations are supported. For example in the Canary et al. (1986) study cited above, these authors suggested that externals adopt an interaction style that relies on the other's confirmation of their dependence. As these authors suggest:

> The findings indicate that powerless actors develop a style that exploits the dominant partner. If this is true, powerless persons might be most effective in contexts where their own dependence can be used and exploited directly by indicating their reliance on others (p. 20).

Any situational or personal factor that would aid, suggest, or facilitate a more active personal control orientation would be inimical to such a style. Rothbaum et al. (1982) also suggest that secondary control strategies are a form of persistent behavior and do not represent the absence of any coping strategy. "Such persistence suggests that the behavior does satisfy some underlying purpose and that it does not merely reflect a "deficit" in motivation" (p. 7). Therefore, one important indication of this work is that merely attempting to "empower" persons without systematically addressing the enthymematic base for their current behavior may be simplistic and result in increased resistance

and anxiety (Hamilton, 1991; cf. Strong & Claiborn, 1982).

The work of Burns & Seligman (1989) and others has shown that optimistic or pessimistic explanatory style to be consistent across life. In a study of thirty subjects over fifty-five, content analysis of their teenage letters and diaries revealed that, "explanatory style for negative events seems to be stable across many years of adult life" (p. 475).

However, as would be expected from the enthymematic perspective of the origin and persistence of these beliefs, such beliefs are sustained and revised through communication. Available evidence suggests that this is the case.

Explanatory style appears to be revisable through strategic (and possibly spontaneous) communication. Seligman (1981) has shown that a change in explanatory style is an outcome of successful therapy. Seligman (1990) cites the therapeutic approaches of Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck as innovative and effective means for combating depression. Both approaches are based on the dialectical challenging of dysfunctional beliefs through an active debate between therapist and client. The underlying premise of both of these approaches was that, "Depression results from lifelong habits of conscious thought. If we change these habits of thought, we will cure depression" (Seligman, 1990, p. 75). Fundamental to such a cure is the revision of dysfunctional thoughts through persuasion.

Implications for Communication Research

To understand the relationship between perceived control and communication it is necessary to understand the enthymematic function of control beliefs. This proposition both places perceived control and/or efficacy at the heart of communicative decision making, and links therapeutic change

with the long tradition of rhetoric or persuasion. The work reviewed above suggests intriguing implications, not only for research, but for our understanding of the nature of strategic or therapeutic communication in general.

The rhetorical nature of therapy has many precedents among communication oriented theorists and practitioners. Forecasting the work of Seligman (1991) and others, Jerome Frank's (1961/1974) work, *Persuasion and Healing,* highlighted the socio-communicative nature of both illness and therapy.

For Frank (1961/1974), the cause of many human dysfunctions was demoralization:

> The social breakdown begins when a discrepancy appears between what a person can do and what he is expected to do, and the environment blames him for being unable to meet its demands. This shakes his self confidence and increases his suggestability. . . If he cannot improve his performance or find an exculpating explanation for his failures to meet the demands placed on him, he becomes increasingly demoralized. As a result, his behavior deteriorates further (p. 299).

The specific causes of demoralization are necessarily personal, since the stress that precipitates demoralization, "is defined by the meaning of the events to the person, not the events in themselves" (p. 7). "In any case," says Frank (1974), the causes and cures for human distress can be found in the person's strategies for dealing with the world, since the person, "is not a helpless victim of obscure, impersonal, pathological processes. . .," but an active agent(p. 300).

Therapy for Frank consisted of strategic communication aimed at

correcting "inappropriate or distorted views of [the self], faulty communications with others, sometimes even. . . views about the meaning of existence," that the person may have adopted as a self-reinforcing, but unsuccessful "solution" to the problem (Frank, 1974, p. 7; see also Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

The work of communication oriented theorists and practitioners in the Palo Alto Group echoed this philosophy (see Watzlawick and Weakland, 1977; Wilder, 1979; Wilder & Weakland, 1981).

> Our fundamental premise is that regardless of their basic origins and etiology-if indeed, these can ever be reliably determined- the kinds of problems people bring to psychotherapists persist only if they are maintained by ongoing current behavior of the patient and others with whom he interacts. Correspondingly, if such problem-maintaining behavior is appropriately changed or eliminated, the problem will be resolved or vanish, regardless of its nature, origin, or duration (Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick, & Bodin, 1977, p. 277).

Although avowedly behavioral in orientation, their cure involves changing the thoughts that motivate the behavior in the here and now, often by changing the meaning of the situation through "reframing" or other rhetorical techniques (see Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

Strong & Claiborn (1980) also eschewed the prolonged analysis of impersonal psychic causes in favor of a straightforward dialectical approach to communicative change through influence. For example, they suggest that, "In the first phase of counseling, the counselor traverses into the client's avenue of meaning, accepting the client's definitions in order to learn what they are" (p. 49). Once the counselor understands the enthymematic base

through which the client perceives the problem and evaluates possible solutions, the therapist can then fashion interventions to match the client's "assumptive world" or begin to challenge or revise these assumptions for strategic effect.

These approaches share the assumption that reason imposes order on a chaotic world, sometimes to our enduring detriment (see Leary, 1957; Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974). As King Novick, & Citrenbaum (1983) express it:

> Most clients experience the world as somewhat impoverished, and yet we know that the world is very rich. Therefore, it is not important that we change the world, but only that we help clients to change their way of viewing the world. Clients often feel "stuck" or "impotent" in their particular life situation, and yet we know that there are a multitude of available options that, if used, would enable them to feel powerful and free (p. 5)

Problems persist because the faulty reasoning that prompted them persists. Beliefs in powerlessness enthymematically sustain powerlessness by highlighting events and causes consistent with such bleak premises, and simultaneously obscure interpretations that might lead to a more efficacious outlook (see Norton, 1981; Seligman, 1990; Strong & Claiborn, 1982). The ways out of such demoralizing impasses may occur spontaneously or senendipitously, but most often they come about through the persuasive efforts of someone given permission to challenge the client's beliefs (see Norton, 1981). The result of some such rhetorical challenges (often reinforced by spontaneous or stage-managed "auspicious moments" to "prove" the point) is that to the client's surprise, "the person realizes that control can be had whenever they want it" (Norton, 1981, p. 319).

The enthymematic nature of perceived control has many implications for the study and practice of strategic communication in many contexts. This hypothesis sensitizes us to the impact of an important psychological variable on the acceptance or rejection of information and influence. It provides predictions of when and how rational messages may be resisted by otherwise rational people.

This hypothesis also takes beliefs in personal control or efficacy, undeniably an important part of a persons' perspectives on the world and demonstrably an important component in their success and happiness, out of the realm of "obscure, impersonal, pathological processes" (Frank, 1974, p. 300) and into the realm of the human dialogue. Jerome Bruner (1990) has asserted that the study of psychology needs to move from its preoccupation with information processing toward a study of how individuals interpret their world through "acts of meaning." The enthymematic nature of control beliefs provides one such "meaning-centered" integration between psychology and communication study. Albert Ellis summarizes the human dilemma by quoting the epigram of Epictetus, "People ar disturbed not by things, but by the views they take of them." It such is the case, then the communication sciences have a central place in the propagation of human welfare.

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[1]Peterson & Sligman (1984) would add to this list, "a lowering of aggression; a lowering of appetite drives; a set of neurochemical deficits; and an increased susceptibility to disease" (p. 349). Self esteem loss sometimes also accompanies the experience of helplessness.